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ABSTRACT

Reflection and evaluation are key to improving the effectiveness of the school library resource center (LRC). The idea of measuring success may seem initially daunting, or even threatening, and be seen as yet another call on already limited time, but we should not be put off: much of the information required is already there, either explicit or implicit, or can be easily extrapolated, and it only needs to be collated, critically evaluated and turned into knowledge about the strengths and the development needs of the LRC. This paper shows why performance measurement is for the benefit of the school pupils and staff, of the LRC and of the librarian; identifies some suitable measures to use; considers how the process might be managed within the context of the LRC; and looks at how the results can be made to work to the advantage of the LRC. It considers both "hard" or quantitative indicators and qualitative measures and looks at the crucial question of the impact of the LRC on learning. (Contains 5 references.) (Author)

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How good is your school library resource centre? An introduction to performance measurement

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Abstract:

Reflection and evaluation are key to improving the effectiveness of the School Library Resource Centre. The idea of measuring success may seem initially daunting, or even threatening, and be seen as yet another call on already limited time, but we should not be put off: much of the information required is already there, either explicit or implicit, or can be easily extrapolated, and it only needs to be collated, critically evaluated and turned into knowledge about the strengths and the development needs of the LRC.

This paper shows why performance measurement is for the benefit of the school pupils and staff, of the LRC and of the librarian; identifies some suitable measures to use; considers how the process might be managed within the context of the LRC; and looks at how the results can be made to work to the advantage of the LRC. It considers both 'hard' or quantitative indicators and qualitative measures and begins to look at the crucial question of the impact of the LRC on learning.

Improving standards and attainment is a government priority, and schools are being asked to evaluate their performance in pursuit of this. We who truly believe libraries are central to learning and teaching know that libraries in school must be part of this process. Self-evaluation is not new; any librarian who has written an annual report has been self-evaluating, and it is something we all do constantly without thinking about it, analysing why one thing is so successful while something else doesn't seem to be working at all.

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Measuring the performance of the School Library Resource Centre using Performance Indicators or benchmarks or national standards is just an extension of this.

By using Performance Indicators it is possible to judge what the LRC is doing well; to identify where improvements are needed to raise effectiveness; to develop the service and to justify funding bids for these developments and improvements. Importantly, using PIs is objective not subjective - not 'I think' but 'The evidence shows'. It also raises the profile of the LRC because it involves the users.

For a number of years now, development planning processes in schools have encourages libraries to look at their performance. The introduction of benchmarking across local authorities has emphasised the measuring of this performance against the performance of others. In 1999 two documents were published with major implications for school libraries and school library services: the CoSLA *Standards for School Library Services in Scotland* and *Taking a closer look at the school library resource centre: self-evaluation using performance indicators*. Although these documents are Scottish, the principles and standards contained within them have a much wider applicability, and are useful tools for any LRC interested in improving performance. The more recent *Primary School Library: Guidelines* gives similar indicators for primary schools. These documents have been widely welcomed by librarians but have also caused widespread apprehension.

Measuring performance in this way is relatively new for librarians. Although used to providing statistical evidence e.g. number of loans per year we have not so often been asked to provide qualitative information. It can seem new and strange and even threatening, and yet another burden which reduces the time available for actually doing the job. But it is possible, by careful planning, to manage more formal self-evaluation within an already busy schedule and make it work to improve your success.

Self-evaluation is an integral part of the development planning cycle. Development Planning is important because it assists in determining priorities and begins to turn good ideas into good practice. An initial audit can reveal a baseline measurement which may help to establish the targets for the development plan, and then progress towards these targets can be measured in the next audit. At its simplest level, development planning consists of three questions:

- How are we doing? - measures where the LRC is now
- How do we know? – identifies the evidence which supports this
- What are we going to do now? – shows the steps necessary for improvement

The first step in performance measurement is to identify what you are going to measure. There are three basic types of information which may be gathered.

Contextual information is general information which provides background detail to contextualise the data gathered. It may include type of school, catchment area, number on roll, number of free meals. This information will probably already be available in school.

Quantitative measures are straightforward counts. They may include accommodation and staffing, budget figures, stock levels, issue figures, services offered, even numbers of enquiries or information skills lessons. They are usually easy to gather but they can be misleading because they give each piece of data or transaction equal importance. These measures are also known as 'hard indicators'.

Qualitative measures are about the value of the items counted above. For example it is not sufficient to count the numbers of resources (a Hard Indicator) it is also necessary to look at their relevance, suitability, age and condition - their quality - and their arrangement and accessibility. Qualitative indicators are also about added value: what impact does the LRC have on the quality of pupils' learning and attainment?

Quantitative and Qualitative measures are complementary and should be used together.

It is not feasible to measure everything in detail all at once, so areas must be prioritised. A broad scan audit could be followed by a more tightly focused look at particular areas. Selecting which areas to concentrate on may be influenced by school or local priorities.

The information gathered could be measured against

- National standards e.g. the Library Association Guidelines; Taking a closer look at the School Library Resource Centre
- Local standards e.g. benchmarking figures from the local school library service or education authority
- School aims and objectives - if the school development plan has a specific focus then that will influence the focus of the LRC audit

How do we know - gathering the evidence.

It is important to realise that gathering evidence does not have to be an extra burden. There is a tremendous amount of useful information already in existence and often minor amendments to existing practice will enable it to be recorded. It is essential to record only the information you will need so this means referring back to the LRC's policy, development plan and key objectives. What are you actually trying to provide evidence for?

There are three categories of evidence:

- *Information which already exists*

This could be contextual information - opening hours per week, number of study spaces in the LRC, number of computers for pupils' use - or data you use as everyday working information e.g. issue statistics, regular class bookings, amount of staff time for running the LRC. It is also well worth keeping an 'evidence box' or library portfolio to gather evidence over the course of the session.

- *Information which can be easily discovered from existing information*

This might include the balance of use by different subject departments by looking at LRC booking information; amount and type of use of ICT facilities; balance of use by different year groups at different times in the academic session. Library management programs can also be a useful source of information of this kind, perhaps allowing analysis of issues by gender, or year group, or of stock by type of resource or age of item.

- *Information which needs to be collected specifically*

The simplest kind of evidence to gather is statistics – 'bean counting'. This could include levels of resource provision (number of books and other items); issue figures; expenditure, study spaces. This makes it an attractive starting point, and the gathering and use of such figures is useful, but care must be taken not to let them become unduly important.

Of course, it is when a LRC is used that it becomes alive, and records of LRC use are a very powerful form of evidence. Most librarians keep a diary to record class bookings; it is well worth extending its use to record other information as well - ad hoc use by groups or individuals; comments from pupils or staff; five-bar gate counts of enquiries; head counts of out of class use e.g. at breaks or lunchtimes. Try to find time to expand cryptic notes: instead of simply 'Miss Robertson 3X1' add 'research for discursive essay' or 'gathering evidence for Vikings investigation'. It doesn't take much longer to do and it can provide extra valuable information and evidence of how the LRC is being used.

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A further extension of this is the LRC logbook in which users record their use of LRC facilities. This can include details of facilities and resources used and record the success or problems of the visit. This needs to be used with discretion - at busy times a log jam of pupils waiting to record this information is counter-productive; however it is worth experimenting with for more limited time periods to gather a more detailed picture of LRC use.

Clearly in a busy LRC it is neither practicable nor desirable for everything to be recorded on the off chance that it might be useful. Some data can be recorded routinely and other specific data targeted on a rolling programme e.g. use out of class time; enquiries; use by specific departments or year groups; ICT use broken down by type. The criteria will depend on the focus of the development plan. It is helpful to schedule these data gathering exercises to ensure consistency (and that they actually happen) e.g. out of class use could be recorded for one week of every term or there could be an ICT focus month, but it is important to set a schedule that you will be able to maintain. Involving other people can be useful here; if you have pupil librarians they will be only too pleased to carry out head counts!

An evidence box can hold administrative and curriculum evidence that could be useful for evaluation. It could include: timetables and booking sheets; worksheets / assignment sheets from departments; examples of pupil work resulting from LRC use (photocopies if pupils need to keep the originals); photographs / videos of the LRC in use; feedback forms from staff and pupils.

The evidence box is particularly useful for beginning to look at the impact of the LRC on pupils' learning. This is after all the central focus of the LRC, and we need to demonstrate our success in raising standards, our contribution to key skills and the vital role of the LRC in developing the necessary skills for life-long learning. But impact on learning is elusive; it is less tangible, and is difficult to quantify. Work done in the LRC is usually integrated into pupils' work and there is often no separate element which can be easily measured. There is no established methodology for measuring it or even for knowing what to measure. The recent Robert Gordon University research project has begun to look at this issue and has identified seven areas of potential impact which could usefully be measured: the acquisition of information; the development of library, information, ICT, reading and study skills; improved quality of work; development of independent and interpersonal skills; motivation and enrichment; transfer of skills across the curriculum; and reading for pleasure.

One approach is to look for evidence under three main headings:

- *evidence of skills development* e.g. % of pupils who can use the library catalogue to locate suitable resources; can use a search engine efficiently; can use note-taking skills; can evaluate resources
- *motivation* - the amount of time pupils are keen, motivated, on task
- *quality of completed work* – transforming and taking ownership of information; communicating information

Evidence of this kind of impact can be gathered in various ways:

- Patterns of use of the LRC - if a department continues to use the LRC for a particular unit of work it is a fair deduction that it is working well - and if use increases, for example by another class from the department beginning to use it for the same unit, that is even better
- Evidence from joint courses between the LRC and a curriculum department is particularly valuable; involvement, particularly at the planning and assessment stages, means the librarian knows what the learning objectives of the work are and can look at how far they have been achieved.
- An offer to display pupil work will give you an opportunity to see the finished article, and departments usually welcome visits to see work and see and hear any presentations the pupils make arising from the work. If possible, examples of work should be obtained from different age groups and different curricular areas.

- Observation can be a useful tool for measuring e.g. the amount of time pupils spend on task, group dynamics or the use of information skills. However, it is not possible for a member of staff involved in delivering al lesson to observe with sufficient closeness and a "critical friend" should be approached to help. Careful design of a record sheet will simplify the process and aid analysis later. Photographs or video-recordings could also be used and would enable closer analysis of pupils' behaviour.

Any attempt to evaluate the contribution of the LRC to pupils' learning is going to be time-consuming. It also needs to be done in collaboration with the teaching staff, who also already have heavy demands upon their time. It will be better undertaken as part of a long-term development plan, with very careful planning.

Other peoples' opinions

Measuring the success of the LRC is not just a job for the librarian; it is also important to find out what other people, your users, think. The LRC after all does not operate in isolation; its whole purpose is to support the work of the school. There are a number of ways in which users' opinions may be gathered.

Surveys and questionnaires can be useful but it is important they are carefully designed and trialled first if the information is to be valuable. There will be a better response from a number of shorter questionnaires spread over several months than one colossal questionnaire which people put off answering. If possible: keep it to two sides of A4 maximum; restrict its scope; make its objectives quite clear; establish clear criteria for any value judgments you ask for. Publishing the results and providing quick feedback will encourage the return of subsequent questionnaires.

Feedback forms can be used e.g. at the end of a unit of work or on the return of a project collection. They should address issues related to pupils' learning and attainment as well as the quality of resources. They can also be used to target specific areas e.g. to evaluate CD-ROM use. It can be illuminating to ask for feedback from pupils as well as staff, and they are usually devastatingly honest. Building up a file of these will enable you not only to judge the success of particular units but also to identify patterns and trends which may highlight particular strengths or development needs.

For more complex issues or a more detailed analysis of what learning is actually happening in the LRC, *interviews and discussions* can provide valuable information. These may be formal or informal, with individuals or small groups, but in any case there should be a clear structure and it is important to take notes and not rely on memory.

All of these methods need to be used with discretion. They will be labour intensive in designing the questionnaire, feedback form or interview schedule and even more so in analysing and interpreting the results. It is vital therefore to choose your targets carefully, to be clear about the information you need and to ask the right questions. If respondents are asked to grade performance on a scale, make sure the target audience understand it and are using the same criteria.

Pulling it all together

The librarian who has done all this collecting, gathering and measuring now has a huge amount of information available. But information is not the same as knowledge; knowledge implies understanding. All this disparate information needs to be synthesised to become knowledge about how successfully the LRC is fulfilling its function. A Performance Measure is a straightforward counting to find a total e.g. the number of fiction books in the LRC; a Performance Indicator will combine two or more measures to demonstrate the performance or success of a specific aspect of the service e.g. the number of fiction books

combined with their quality combined with the issue figures can give a much more powerful statement such as 'the LRC has a high quality fiction stock used by 80% of the S1 cohort'. Indicators may be taken from published guidelines, such as 'Taking a closer look at the School Library Resource Centre' or designed to meet the objectives of the LRC or school development plan.

This knowledge and understanding can then be compared with the standards or targets being used. This enables a judgment to be made on the success of the LRC and helps identify areas which need improvement and those which only need to be maintained. It may be helpful to carry out a SWOT analysis of the results and look at

- *Strengths* - what are you really good at e.g. well-used, strong on ICT
- *Weaknesses* - what are the major problem areas e.g. inadequate stock, a poor environment
- *Opportunities* - what can you build on e.g. new courses, supported study
- *Threats* - what might stop you improving e.g. lack of space or money

We have now answered the first two questions: *How are we doing?* and *How do we know?* We have a measurement of the success of the LRC backed up by sound evidence. We also have the necessary information to answer the question:

What are we going to do now?

The development plan arises naturally from the matching of the audit results with the LRC's aims and objectives. It will also link to the school and education authority development plans.

Start by identifying the LRC's strengths (even the weakest LRC will have some: undertaking self-evaluation is in itself a strength). Then look for areas which are satisfactory and only need maintenance. Finally identify areas for improvement.

Once the areas which need improvement have been identified, then it is necessary to prioritise them. It is important to select areas that it is possible to do something about. It can be hard to accept but if there are areas where the LRC falls short, but which are genuinely outwith your control (e.g. inadequate heating system), then they may have to be accepted. It is tempting to try and address all your problems at once, but trying to do too much will only result in nothing being satisfactorily achieved. Once the priorities of the education authority and school have been taken into account, then the over riding criterion for prioritising should be the needs of the pupils.

Identify projects to tackle these issues and set targets for improvement. These are more likely to be successful if they are realistic, achievable and limited in number. Targets should be specific e.g. 'review science stock in light of 5-14 guidelines for environmental studies', and success criteria should be carefully framed. Targets may be short, medium or long term. For major projects it is useful to produce an action plan dividing the project into manageable steps detailing the resources, people and timescale involved. It is also morale boosting to build in a number of TATTs - Tiny Achievable Tickable Targets. Setting dates for achieving targets helps to keep your mind focused and turn good intentions into good practice. It also provides built in times for monitoring and review of progress. This constant evaluation will quickly begin to identify the areas which need to be audited for the next cycle of development planning.

Conclusion

Measuring success is not an end in itself; it is a tool for improvement. It demonstrates the LRC's contribution to school learning and teaching and provides evidence to back up your concerns. It gives your proposals and documentation greater authority and impresses senior management.

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Self-evaluation is valuable. It may seem initially demanding, perhaps even threatening, but it is also enlightening, invigorating and a very potent catalyst for change and development.

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